

## Secrets of the Shriners\* (\* ... or at least their tiny cars)

PRII

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Since the Shriners' Kena 500 unit started performing in the Falls Church City Memorial Day Parade, they have been one of its undisputed highlights. Their sleek mini-Corvettes, executing precision maneuvers, combined with their ever-so-stylish fezzes, give them a perfect combination of supreme goofiness and undeniable coolness. It's impossible to see them drive their cars without wanting to drive one yourself very, very badly. You could probably count the number of people in Falls Church who wouldn't jump at a chance to drive one of those cars on one hand. Those lucky few who do get to drive the cars are Shriners, an appended body of the Masonic organization, and as one would expect, they are incredibly enthusiastic about the cars they drive.

The Kena 500, so named because it is part of the Kena (pronounced "Kee-na") Shrine which makes up the Shriner's presence in Northern Virginia, has been in existence since two Shriners managed to get their hands on the minuscule automobiles. The cars are "Chevy Juniors," which were made by Chevrolet to promote their new "Stingray" car model in the 1960s. Two original Kena 500 members happened to be the owners of Fairfax's Farrish Automotive, and when they got wind of the car's existence, managed to buy them off Chevrolet when the company was done with them.

"Since then the Shriners have been collecting mini-Corvettes and created the Kena 500," says 45-year-old Jeff St. Onge, a contractor with the Department of Defense and driver of car number 20.

The Chevy Juniors pack a wallop five horsepower engine and top out at around thirty five miles an hour — though it seems a lot faster when riding only a few inches from the ground. The engine also doesn't have to haul much, just a metal frame, a light plastic covering and the drivers. Most of the cars you see in the parade are 35 years old.

The series of heart-in-mouth weaves, tight turns and assorted other maneuvers that the Kena 500 pulls off during their parade routine require a steady hand and iron nerves ... and a bit of practice.

"We practice every Tuesday in the Shrine parking lot," says Shelby Chandler, driver of the Kena 500's "recovery vehicle," used in cases when their maneuvers weren't quite as precise as was needed.

These practice sessions prepare the 22-member outfit for the 25 parades and events they perform in annually. The awe-inspiring feats of Kena 500 can't be contained to U.S. Borders. In addition to performing all around the country, since their creation, they have performed in France and England as well.

Practice season runs from May to August of each year, and its purpose is not just to prepare the Shriners for their parade-day exhibitions.

"Practice stops because we enter two conventions. At the conventions we have unit competitions," says St. Onge. While every event that the Kena 500 performs in is certainly important, the Mid Atlantic and South Atlantic regional intra-Shrine competitions are the most important in terms of bragging rights.

"Practice is basically driving us toward the competition," says St. Onge.

Auto enthusiasts would appreciate the wide variety of mini-cars on display at the competitions, with the Stingrays serving as just the tip of the iceberg.

"In our division there are normally Prowlers, Cobras, little Model T's, each individual shrine temple has its own car," says Chris Decker, an RFID Engineer and driver of car number 29.

The first part of each competition, besides the Shriners playing mean but good-natured tricks on one another, is a rigorous uniform and car inspection.

"They check for everything, the size of your buttons, the spacing of decals on your car. It's almost like being back in the military," says St. Onge, a former GI.

The inspections are followed by a drill where a unit has 10 minutes to show off their most practiced and precise moves. Assuming all the cars and drivers are still in working order, the competitors must complete a driving course, for which they are graded on time and are disqualified if they knock over any cones or cross too far over the finishing mark. The winning team wins an appropriately tall trophy for prominent display, and bragging rights.

Their competitive side also comes out in the form of impromptu races which, according to Decker, occur pretty often. According to him, "They'll race at the drop of a hat ... and drop the hat."

"It seems hard for a group of Shriners and cars to get together and not have a race happen," adds St. Onge.

"There are two types of driving that every Shriner does, fun driving and serious driving," says Chandler.

After talking with a group of Shriners, it's hard to believe that they're serious about anything, with the exception of Shrine temple's central goal — free hospital care to any child under the age of 18. The Shrine was started 81 years ago by two Masons who wanted to create a division of the Masons more centered around having fun and providing medical care to children. There are 22 shrine hospitals in North America, and Shriners volunteer to drive patients from their local shrine temple to the nearest shrine hospital ... using real cars, not the mini-Corvettes. Members of the Kena shrine drive prospective patients from the local shrine to the Shrine Hospital in Philadelphia.

"They're the only hospitals in the country without a billing department," Chandler says. The only requirement for treatment is if the doctor determines they can improve the child's quality of life."

Then, of course, there's the all-important matter of manipulating world events in a global conspiracy to rule the world.

"We decide who the President should be after the fish-fry," reveals Decker, joking ... we think.

You can see these masters of plastic and metal in the upcoming City of Falls Church 27th Annual Memorial Day Parade and Festival presented by Cox. Be sure to shout out your suggestion of who you think the Democratic nominee should be as they drive by.

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